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An Interview with Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie

Paul J. Archambault
Syracuse University

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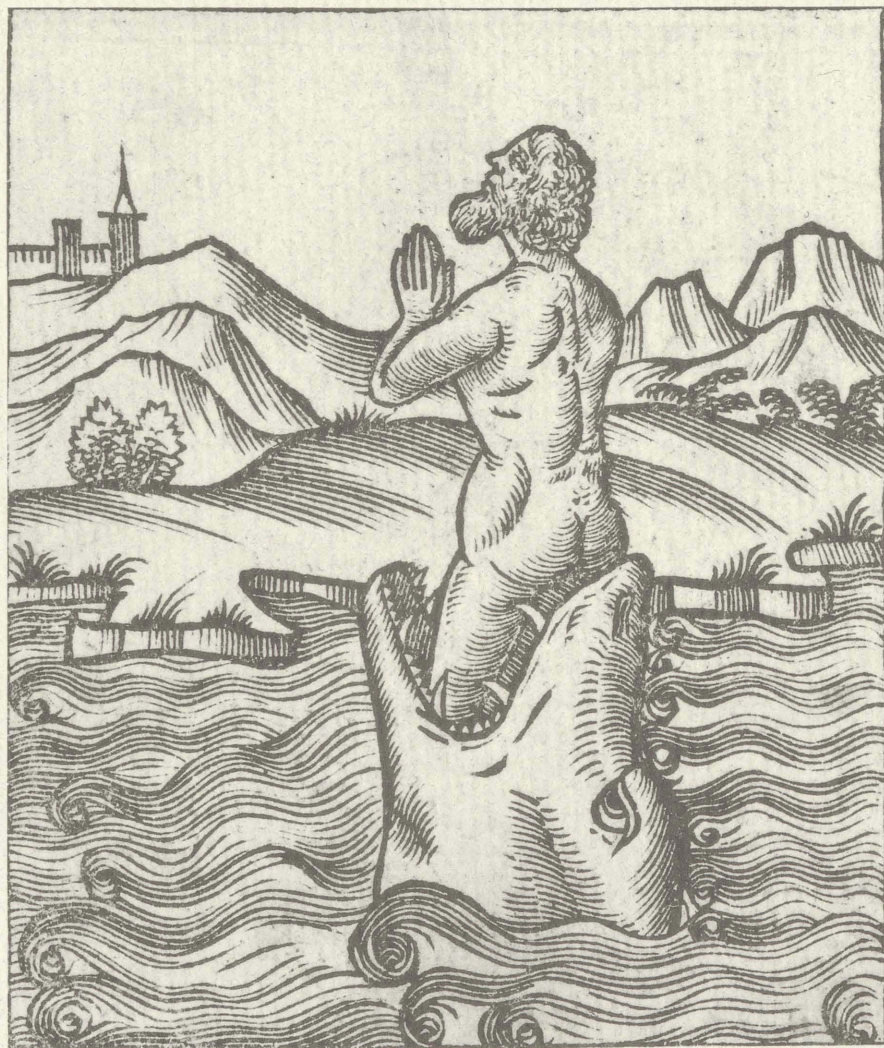
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An Interview with Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie

BY PAUL J. ARCHAMBAULT

INTRODUCTION:

EMMANUEL LE ROY LADURIE AT SYRACUSE

BORN IN 1929, Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie has held the chair of modern history at the Collège de France since 1973. He served as administrator general of the Bibliothèque Nationale, in Paris, from 1987 to 1994. He is also codirector of the prestigious French historical review *Annales. Economies. Sociétés. Civilisations*.

Le Roy Ladurie belongs to what some historians refer to as the “third generation” of *Annales* historians. His more than thirty books and hundreds of articles have included works dealing with long time spans, such as *The Peasants of Languedoc* (1966) and the *History of Climate since the Year 1000* (1983); and with subjects with a microscopic focus such as *Carnival in Romans* (1979), which focuses on a two-week period around carnival time in a town in the Dauphiné in February 1580, a period marked first by celebration, then by massacre. Professor Ladurie’s popular *Montaillou: The Promised Land of Error* (1978), a six-hundred-page monograph on a small village in the Pyrenees foothills, was based on the Latin record, written in the year 1320, of questions asked of two hundred inhabitants of the village who were suspected of Cathar heresy by the French inquisitor, Jacques Pamier, bishop of Pamiers, future Avignon pope.

Paul J. Archambault, professor of French, received his Ph.D. from Yale University. Since 1968 he has taught at Syracuse University, specializing in medieval Latin as well as French literature and civilization. He was founding editor (1979–82) of *Syracuse Scholar: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Ideas* and editor (1987–94) of *Symposium: A Quarterly Journal of Modern Foreign Literatures*. Professor Archambault’s most recent book is *A Monk’s Confession: The Memoirs of Guibert de Nogent* (1996).

In the 8 November 1979 number of *The New York Review of Books*, Lawrence Stone, Dodge Professor of History at Princeton University, called LeRoy Ladurie “one of the most . . . original, versatile, and imaginative historians in the world,” adding that his French colleague had “an almost unique capacity to capture the imagination of a mass audience, while still retaining the respect and admiration of his professional colleagues.”

Professor Ladurie came to the Syracuse University campus for a two-day visit in the fall of 1994. On 8 November 1994, he was a guest of the Syracuse University Library Associates and lectured in the 1916 Room on the topic: “The French National Library: A.D. 1000–2000.” The next day he visited the Department of Special Collections and sat in the chair once owned by the “father of modern history,” Leopold von Ranke (1795–1886), whose vast personal library resides in the department.

Following is a slightly abridged version of an interview with Professor Ladurie at his Paris home on 3 May 1995. The interview dealt with a range of topics, from French “new history” to Professor Ladurie’s experiences as a top library administrator and civil servant under a Socialist government. The interview was conducted in French. Professor Ladurie has approved this English translation.

An Interview with Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie

I. THE HISTORIAN'S CAREER. THE *ANNALES* AND ITS IMPACT

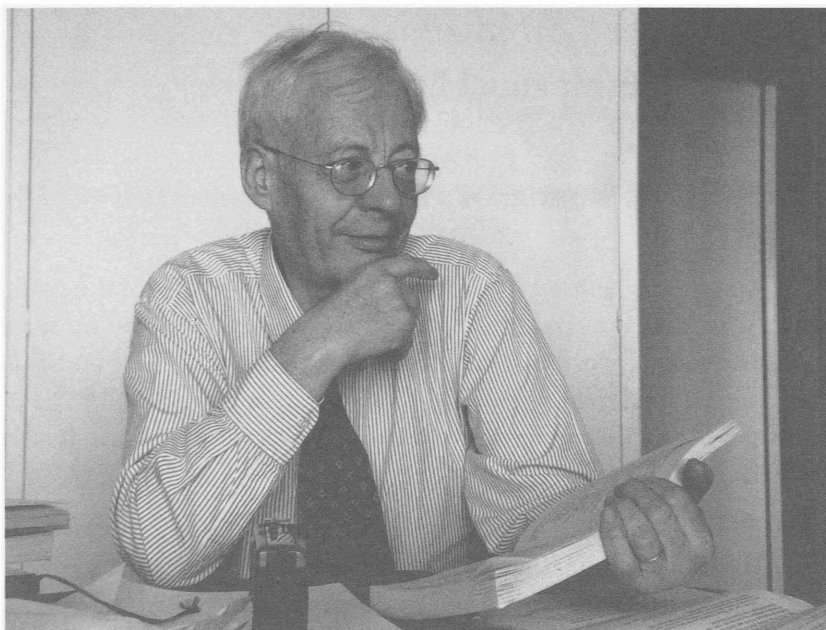
PA: The review *Annales E.S.C.*,¹ of which you are one of the codirectors, recently celebrated its sixty-fifth anniversary. Do you see a continuity between the review founded by Marc Bloch² and Lucien Febvre³ and the review of today? What, in your opinion, have been the strong moments of the review? What direction will it take in the future?

ELRLD: There is certainly a continuity, insofar as the review has remained faithful to certain decisions made with respect to rigor, to an “anti-event” orientation, and to quantification. This orientation came, if not from Marc Bloch and Lucien Febvre directly, at least

1. *Annales E.S.C.* is the journal's current title. Since its creation in 1929 the journal has had four titles: *Annales d'histoire économique et sociale* (1929–39); *Annales d'histoire sociale* (1939–42; 1945); *Mélanges d'histoire sociale* (1942–44); *Annales: Economies, Sociétés, Civilisations* (1946–). See Peter Burke, *The French Historical Revolution* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1990), 117, n. 2.

2. Born in 1886, Marc Bloch was cofounder (1929) and codirector of the *Annales* with Lucien Febvre until 1942. Bloch revolutionized modern historical methodology with books like *Les Rois thaumaturges* (*The royal touch*) (1924), *Les Caractères originaux de l'histoire rurale française* (*French rural history: An essay on its basic characteristics*) (1966), and *La Société féodale* (*Feudal society*) (1961). Bloch was arrested by the Gestapo as a member of the French Resistance and, after being tortured, was executed on 16 June 1944.

3. Lucien Febvre (1878–1956) was cofounder of the *Annales* with Marc Bloch at the University of Strasbourg, where both held chairs of history. He was appointed to the chair of history of modern civilization at the Collège de France in 1933. Febvre's conception of history as a synthesis of various disciplines is most explicitly set forth in *Le Problème de l'incroyance au XVI^e siècle: La Religion de Rabelais* (*The problem of unbelief in the sixteenth century: Rabelais's Religion*) (1942), and in a series of largely polemical essays grouped under the title *Combats pour l'histoire* (1953; reprint 1992) (*A new kind of history: From the writings of Lucien Febvre*).



Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie at his home in Paris, 1995. (Photograph by Marianna Archambault.)

from their school.⁴ The review had simultaneously a willingness to open itself to the great outside world, to do a history of the masses, a history of material production, and to be open to certain current trends, for example, the interest in the history of the Mediterranean peoples.

As far as the strong moments of the review are concerned, I see several: the thirties, of course, for which we now have the entire correspondence of Marc Bloch and Lucien Febvre;⁵ the postwar era, when Jacques Le Goff⁶ and I became directors of the review,

4. Owing to the combative tone of Lucien Febvre's early articles, the *Annales* soon acquired a reputation for favoring "anti-événementiel" (nonevent-centered) history, that is, for rejecting traditional, chronologically sequenced history based largely on the chief political and diplomatic events of the French nation.

5. Marc Bloch, Lucien Febvre, *Correspondance*, 3 vols., ed. Bernard Müller (Paris: Fayard, 1994).

6. Born in 1924, Jacques Le Goff is professor of historical anthropology at the

starting around 1965 or so. It was then that we broadened our interests to include biological history, a history of societies, ethnological history, and to a certain extent, a history of climates. We attempted to create what were then considered new “territories.”⁷ Since that time, of course, we have “reproduced” a number of devotees, both within the review and elsewhere.

As far as continuity of development goes, I believe the *Annales* has branched out from and enriched the fundamental axis of historiography since its very beginning. It must continue to take into account the importance of events (in spite of its reputation for being an “anti-événementiel” journal), and the importance of great historical figures, but of course, these are to be found within the “thick mass” of historical materials. That is what the *Annales* have brought us. Whether everyone at the *Annales* would follow me on this point, I’m not sure. I rather see myself as “post-Braudelian.”

PA: What do you mean by “post-Braudelian”?

ELRLD: I mean simply that I would rather accept Braudel⁸ “à la carte” than order the whole menu. I like to think it’s possible to follow Braudel selectively without having to follow him in every instance.

Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes (VIe Section) in Paris. He has been codirector of *Annales E.S.C.* with Le Roy Ladurie and Marc Ferro since 1969. Le Goff’s many books include *Marchands et banquiers au moyen âge* (Merchants and bankers in the Middle Ages) (1956), *La Civilisation de l’occident médiéval* (The civilization of the medieval West) (1965), *La Naissance du purgatoire* (The birth of purgatory) (1981), and *Histoire et mémoire* (History and memory) (1986).

7. “Territory” is a favorite term with Le Roy Ladurie. Several of his key essays on the historical métier have been collected in a two-volume collection entitled *Le Territoire de l’historien* (*The territory of the historian*) (1979).

8. A disciple and protégé of Lucien Febvre, Fernand Braudel (1902–1985) held the chair of modern history at the Collège de France from 1949 to 1972. Braudel’s most influential work was *La Méditerranée et le monde méditerranéen à l’époque de Philippe II* (1949; rev. ed. 1966) (*The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean world in the age of Philip II*). For three decades, from the death of Lucien Febvre in 1956 to his own death in 1985, Braudel was considered the leading and most powerful French historian. See Burke, *French Historical Revolution*, 43.

PA: Does that mean you wish to return to an event-centered conception of history?

ELRLD: No, of course not. A purely event-centered history is absurd. But the important thing is what other things the event can reveal. If Febvre, in particular, had a predilection for economic history, which he knew particularly well, it was out of a desire to “reconcile peoples.” To do this during the twenties and thirties—at a time when people were not at all ready for reconciliation, when perverse men like Stalin and Hitler were weighing on the future of humanity, and when war, or preparation for war, was on everyone’s mind—seems something of a paradox, in my opinion.

PA: We’ll return to your conception of the “history of events” later on in this interview when we discuss the making of your book on the Platters.⁹ Let’s stay with the *Annales* for the time being, and its relation to your career as historian. Among the great historians of the past who were linked to the *Annales*—Bloch, Febvre, Braudel—which would you say most influenced your orientation as a historian? And were there other factors—your readings, your teachers, people you met—impacting on your decision to become a historian, and especially a historian of rural life?

ELRLD: Well, rather curiously, at a certain moment the man who had the greatest influence on me in the university world was Ernest Labrousse, whom we don’t hear about as much as we used to though he has not been forgotten. He was a great “quantitativist” historian for his time, and wrote about the history of prices in the eighteenth century, the so-called economic crisis of the French Revolution, about which I would differ with him. But on the rising scale of prices in the eighteenth century he wrote a remarkable work.¹⁰ Labrousse represented for me a transition from a purely

9. Le Roy Ladurie’s *Le Siècle des Platter 1499–1628, I. Le Mendiant et le professeur* (*The century of the Platters, I. The Beggar and the Professor*) (Paris: Fayard, 1995) had recently appeared in print. It is a study of two generations of Basel humanists, Thomas Platter Senior and his two sons Felix and Thomas.

10. A Marxist economic historian, Ernest Labrousse (b. 1895) held a chair of history at the Sorbonne and wrote a multivolume economic and social history, *Histoire économique et sociale de la France* (Paris: Parti Socialiste Uni, 1970–82). The

dogmatic Marxism to a more quantitative approach to history. But he was a rather narrow man. And indeed I met Braudel a bit later, when I was twenty-seven or twenty-eight.

Braudel was, in an early phase of my career, my administrative protector. He helped me find my first teaching position, was very interested in what I was doing, and I, in turn, was very influenced by his thinking. In many ways Braudelian thought was very general. He made the idea of “longue durée” a household word, but “longue durée” is a concept quickly exhausted.¹¹ It’s a kind of conceptual diesel engine, able to function on cheap fuel! Let’s take Marxism: it’s a crazy ideology, but very detailed: you have concepts like infrastructure, superstructure, forces of production, relations of production, etc. It’s a whole sophisticated mechanism. But “longue durée” is a concept that, once used, doesn’t lead you very far. You wonder what it applies to. It certainly represents an interesting intellectual position.

This being said, Braudel’s *Mediterranean* had an enormous influence on me.¹²

PA: You read it immediately after its first publication?

ELRLD: I was still very much immersed in Stalinism when it appeared, but in 1953, when I was preparing my *Agrégation*,¹³ I read it,

“remarkable book” Le Roy Ladurie is here alluding to is Labrousse’s classic work *L’Esquisse des mouvements des prix et des revenus en France au XVIII^e siècle* (*Outline of the movements of prices and revenues in France in the eighteenth century*) (1933).

11. “Longue durée” is a phrase made famous by Fernand Braudel in his seminal article on the stratification, in history, of short and long cycles of duration, “Histoire et sciences sociales: La longue durée,” *Annales* 13 (1958): 725–53.

12. During the years following its first publication in 1949, Braudel’s *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World* had a great impact on historians in and outside of France, especially part 1, dealing with the “ever-recurring cycles” of Mediterranean history, and part 2, dealing with “collective destinies and general trends.” See Peter Burke’s discussion of the book in *French Historical Revolution*, 33–42.

13. The *Agrégation* has no precise American equivalent. The *concours d’agrégation* is a highly selective national competition, given annually in several academic disciplines, comprising arduous written and oral examinations. Being numbered among the elect (normally less than five percent of those competing) guarantees

and I was much impressed by Braudel's way of doing history. Historians could no longer ignore it. One had to do geographical history, economic history. As for Braudel's other works, the article on the "longue durée" is important. I think his *Capitalism* is an important work, but has anyone really read Braudel's *Capitalism*?¹⁴ The book is sold in airports in the United States, but I've often asked myself whether anybody reads it.

But Braudel was at the same time an empire builder, a rather difficult but very rich personality. He was a man of power, well connected, who managed to create a great number of research positions. He also knew how to recognize people of talent. Braudel had a great flair for dealing with people. He was a master, in every sense of the word.

Lucien Febvre is a man I never really knew. The campaign that has been waged against him by some American historians who accuse him of being anti-Semitic seems grotesque to me.

PA: Is this "campaign" something recent?

ELRLD: Yes, there are a few Grand Inquisitors who are indulging in political correctness by making accusations that are shocking, especially when you consider the work Febvre did on the sixteenth century. The bibliography of his publications, especially on the sixteenth century, fills an entire volume, which means a lot of reading for those who want to attack him.¹⁵

PA: He had a provocative side to him, of course. I was rereading his *Combats pour l'histoire* recently, and I was struck once again by the dynamism of his personality, which must have impressed those who knew him, favorably or unfavorably. He had a very abrupt, provocative manner of formulating problems.

a tenured academic position but also opens avenues in diplomacy and other civil positions.

14. The allusion here is to Fernand Braudel's *Civilisation matérielle et capitalisme* (*Capitalism and material life, 1400–1800*) (New York: Harper and Row, 1973).

15. Le Roy Ladurie seems to be alluding here to Natalie Zemon Davis's criticism of Lucien Febvre's failure to criticize or confront the German occupiers of France during the years 1940–44. Febvre's book on Rabelais appeared in 1942 after clearance by the Vichy censors.

ELRLD: He often treated other people as if they were stupid. Unfortunately, this is an accepted form of behavior in the *Annales* milieu, where historians have a tendency to treat other scholars with contempt.

As for Bloch, what really stands out for me is his book on the original characteristics of French feudalism, which posed key questions about the rural landscape. It was a book that had a great importance for me early in my career—I must have read it between 1955 and 1957.¹⁶ Since Bloch's time, of course, rural history has been enriched by ten thousand years. Through archeology and prehistory we know things that Bloch could not possibly have known, about the introduction of agriculture in Europe and in America, the planting of corn, etc. Carbon 14, for example, allows us to give precise dates concerning the arrival of agriculture five, eight, even ten thousand years before Christ, in the Mediterranean, the Danube region, present-day France, England, etc. The same thing holds for China, India, the Middle East, North America, Mexico, South America (with the invention of corn by the Indians), etc. This really enables us to have a world history, a history that is very much an *Annales* history, since by definition it is a “nonevent” type of history, with no events of political history at all.

PA: As regards your becoming a historian of rural life, did you make that decision when you chose your subject for your doctoral thesis?

ELRLD: This choice was due both to chance and to the “servitudes” of existence. America is a rich country where, through a system of grants or fellowships, a historian from, say, a Midwestern university can decide to be a historian of Turkey, or China, or Europe, and can find the library resources, then the fellowship that allows her to do some on-site research. There was nothing of the kind in the France of the fifties. Though team research already existed, especially in Paris in the circle surrounding Braudel, researchers teaching in the universities of Provence were somewhat isolated and had to give up the idea of doing anything original. I

16. Le Roy Ladurie is alluding to Marc Bloch's influential book *Les Caractères originaux de l'histoire rurale française* (1966; 2d ed., 1992).

had thought of doing my doctoral thesis on the economic crisis of the nineteenth century, but I hadn't the means to do so at Montpellier. So I had to fall back on rural history. One of my colleagues in geography suggested I look into surveyors' reports since the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, and I realized that I had an original resource for historical research.

Another factor in my choosing rural history was that on my father's side I came from the rural bourgeoisie of Normandy. This relation with my father had been a conflictual one, but I decided nevertheless to make this my field of research. It had not been my intention to do this for the rest of my life.

PA: This was at the time you received your first appointment at the University of Montpellier, wasn't it?¹⁷

ELRLD: Yes.

PA: Besides your work in the local archives, what other kinds of research did you do? Did you, for example, do any research among the peasants themselves?

ELRLD: I traveled a great deal and observed the peasantry. I knew the region very well. And there were rich archives in the local town halls as well, so I had to travel throughout the area.

PA: Here's a rather complex question concerning your historical methodology. Some of your best known works, such as *The Peasants of Languedoc* or the *History of Climate since the Year 1000*, cover periods of "longue durée." Others, like *Montaillou*, *The Sorceress of Jasmin*, or *Carnival in Romans* cover subjects or events of very short

17. After receiving the *agrégation*, Le Roy Ladurie was appointed professor of history at the Lycée de Montpellier (1955–57). Then he was attached to a local branch of a national research institute, the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique (1958–60). He was subsequently named assistant in history at the University of Montpellier (1960–63). His research on the rural life of the Montpellier region led to the prestigious *doctorat d'état* (state doctoral thesis) and to its publication in a two-volume work, *Les Paysans de Languedoc* (1966) (*Peasants of Languedoc*, trans. with an introduction by John Day [Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1974]). For a personal discussion of those years, see his *Paris-Montpellier 1945–1963* (Paris: Gallimard, 1982), 200.

duration. Do long-period works demand a different methodology? More quantitative analysis? Do they involve more risks, require more speculation, generalization, large perspectives?

ELRLD: I'm wondering if this isn't a pseudo-problem. If I look back to the work I have done in the past ten years or so, I find some articles that I might term quantitative or "serial." Maybe they're not worthy of the research done by American econometricians, but I have done research on demography in the Duke of Saint-Simon's memoirs, etc. The demographic history, the radioactive study of coins, the history of the book, which I've done as part of a cataloging project at the Bibliothèque Nationale—these are entirely classic works in serial history. These studies were published in reviews like the *Annales* and the *Annuaire du Collège de France*, and though they did not attract too much attention I considered them very important.

And then you mustn't forget that I did the *History of Modern France* in two volumes, for the Hachette publishing house.¹⁸ Somebody told me this was "vulgarization." Not at all. These two volumes required much reflection, and though the work involves a long "duration," it is a classic work of history, though it has a coloration of economic, social, and political history. *The Peasants of Languedoc* and the *History of Climate* are both, as you say, works involving the "longue durée." *Montaillou* covers a short duration of thirty years, which allows one to do a microscopic analysis, since it deals with a short period and a small community, about which we were fortunate to have an extraordinary document (and I am a great believer in documents).¹⁹ The *Carnival in Romans* deals with an extraordinarily short duration—there is an element of coy provocation about this book—but it also contains larger analyses about the city of Romans itself.²⁰ Finally, my book on the Platters

18. E. LeRoy Ladurie, *Histoire de la France moderne*, 2 vols. (Paris: Hachette, 1985).

19. *Montaillou: The Promised Land of Error* covers the period 1294–1324 and is based on the inquisitor's record (see introduction).

20. *Carnival in Romans* covers essentially a two-week period in the town of Romans in February 1580 (see introduction).

covers over a century, in theory, and is consequently “layered” with considerations pertaining to that century.²¹

I don’t think my books have different “methodologies,” as you put it. You sometimes have what might be called a “microhistory,” which one hopes can enlighten the subsequent history of humanity. I have used quantitative history in technical studies dealing with the history of precious metals, the history of books, and demographic history. My book on the Platters, on the other hand, or *Montaillou*, deals more with the qualitative.

As regards what you call “greater risks,” of course they exist if you are dealing with vast generalizations and syntheses—which history professors tend to do when they are past sixty; they deal with “world” history and often “risk” saying just about anything. On the other hand, when you are dealing with a subject that is well known to you of course generalizations are needed. Personally I find myself inspired by those great German-Jewish scholars who knew Russian, German, Italian, French, English, etc.—people of enormous learning, like Kantorowicz²² and others.

PA: I’d like to ask you a final question concerning the impact of the *Annales* on other disciplines. Currently it is often the case that *Annales* historians—and social scientists linked directly or indirectly to that journal—are those who most often represent French thought in universities abroad.

I was trained in literature, and when I was in graduate school toward the end of the fifties, “French thought” was still represented essentially by Sartre and Camus, the former an *Agrégé* in philosophy, the latter a Nobel laureate in literature. French lecturers in the United States in those days were most often novelists and poets, or so it seemed to me. By the end of the seventies, social sciences seemed to take the lead over literature. The figures best known in American universities were historians like yourself and François

21. The two-volume *Le Siècle des Platter* covers the period 1599–1628.

22. Ernst Kantorowicz (1895–1963), a distinguished German-Jewish scholar who fled Nazi Germany and emigrated to America. Among his best-known works is *The King’s Two Bodies: A Study in Medieval Political Theology* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957).

Furet, and of course there were leading philosophers like Paul Ricoeur, Michel Foucault, and Jacques Derrida.²³

It is my view that though the *Annales* had a great impact on other disciplines, and has promoted interdisciplinarity in general, the review has had little impact on literary history or criticism. I don't know of any literary historian whose thinking has been shaped by the *Annales*. I would even add that literary history and criticism are right now "on the back burner" in France and producing very little original work. Is that your view?

ELRLD: I have a similar impression. Marc Fumaroli,²⁴ of course, is a brilliant figure. There was Barthes,²⁵ who had the misfortune of dying relatively young and did not have any successors.

23. François Furet (b. 1927) has written several works on the French Revolution taking issue with a Marxist view that has held sway in France since the late nineteenth century, especially *Penser la Révolution française* (*Thinking the French Revolution*) (Paris: Gallimard, 1978). He has also edited, with Mona Ozouf, *A Critical Dictionary of the French Revolution*, (trans. Artur Goldhammer [Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1989]). Paul Ricoeur (b. 1913) is an internationally known philosopher. He is currently professor of philosophy emeritus at the University of Chicago. Michel Foucault (1926–1984) was engaged in a multivolume history of sexuality at the time of his death. He lectured widely in the United States, especially at the universities of Buffalo, Berkeley, and Davis. Jacques Derrida (b. 1930) is professor of philosophy at the Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales in Paris. His major works include *De la grammaire* (1967), *L'Écriture et la différence* (*Writing and difference*) (1967), *La Dissémination* (1972), and *La Carte postale* (*The postcard*) (1987). He has lectured widely in American universities.

24. Marc Fumaroli holds the chair of French literature at the Collège de France in Paris. He has written books on Poussin and French literature. During the years of Mitterrandian socialism (1981–86 and 1988–91) he took violent issue with the populist orientation of the cultural policies of Jack Lang, Mitterrand's minister of culture.

25. Perhaps the most original literary and social critic of the last half century in France, Roland Barthes (1915–1980) combined intuitions derived from Freud, Marx, and [Ferdinand de] Saussurian linguistics with a highly personal, intuitive reading of texts to produce scores of works. Among the most influential are: *Le degré zéro de l'écriture* (*The degree zero of writing*) (1953), *Mythologies* (1957), *Sade, Fourier, Loyola* (1971), *Le Plaisir du texte* (*The pleasure of the text*) (1973), and *L'Empire des signes* (*The empire of signs*) (1970).

PA: When Sartre, for example, did his long phenomenological study on Flaubert,²⁶ he didn't do any archival work such as might be expected of an *Annales* historian.

ELRLD: I'm unable to comment on the value of Sartre's work on Flaubert. I do know, however, that Michel Crouzet's biography of Stendhal involved a great deal of archival research. There, I think, is a good example of a literary historian. I think the chief problem with literary history is that either you're dealing with petty salon problems that are best discussed over a cup of tea, or with the traditional academic scholarship of the Sorbonne variety. We don't seem to have come up with any middle solution.

II. A RECENT PUBLICATION: THE HISTORY OF THE PLATTERS

PA: With your permission I would like to ask you a few questions about the first volume of your history of the Platters, *The Beggar and the Professor*, which was recently published. First, how did you discover the Platters?

ELRLD: I knew of them back in 1955 because of their connections with Montpellier. Historians at Montpellier knew the existing French translations, which were mediocre and had been mutilated.

PA: It's a fact, isn't it, that there were nineteenth-century translations of the Platters' diaries?

ELRLD: Yes, and people relied on them. The major obstacle, of course, was the language. I have studied a great deal of German, though I do not speak it well. I read High German easily, but the problem with the Platters' diaries was that they were written in the Basel dialect. That world was closed to me. I used the existing Swiss editions, which are excellent.

I was also interested in the Platters because of my interest in the Alps. I have known Alpine mountaineers who, like the Platters of

26. Known chiefly as a philosopher, playwright, and political critic, Jean-Paul Sartre (1905–1980) wrote a three-volume work on Gustave Flaubert, *L'Idiot de la famille* (*The family idiot: Gustave Flaubert, 1821–1857*, trans. Carol Cosman [Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1981]).

the sixteenth century, “climbed up” the social ladder to become, not painters or city planners (like the Platters), but at least metal workers . . . by “climbing down” the Alps. It’s an expression of sorts with them: you climb up by climbing down. (You might compare them with the Appalachian hillbillies in the United States.)

I had written a few short pieces about the Platters before, but in writing this book I was making an old dream come true. The story of the Platters is based on a fascinating assortment of texts, and I enjoy writing about people whose biographies are a résumé, a mirror, a magnifying lens, as it were, of an entire period. I could have written about Saint-Simon on the reign of Louis XIV,²⁷ but much has already been written on that subject in France. The advantage with the Platters is that, though they have been much written about in the German-speaking world, there is little written on them in French or in English.

PA: They were itinerant humanists, of course, and their travels make them eyewitnesses of some of the great events of the sixteenth century.

ELRLD: As I said in the dedication of my first volume, they are a “distant mirror” of the Renaissance and the Protestant Reformation. I wrote about Thomas Platter Senior’s identity crisis, a violent conversion to iconoclasm around 1520 or so. The Platters were involved in various humanistic movements of the century, in and around Basel. For example, Thomas Senior abandoned the harsh, violent form of Protestantism he had known in his early years, with Zwingli and Calvin. As far as the two Platter sons were concerned, their training in medicine gave them access to Greek culture. We know, moreover, that they were great collectors who built up distinguished art collections. Without being extraordinary people, they were representative of the Renaissance. They illustrate a certain type of Franco-German relationship that seems to me characteristic. They shed light on the rapport between Catholic France

27. Louis de Rouvroy, Duc de Saint-Simon (1675–1755), whose memoirs of the late reign of Louis XIV (1700–1715) and of the French Regency (1723–29) are one of the chief sources of court history for that era.

and Protestant Germany, and on the social mobility of the times, which existed then as it does today, though in a different mode.²⁸

PA: You state on several occasions that one of the Platters suffered from depressions that were perhaps due to religious conflicts within himself.

ELRLD: Felix Platter, Thomas's son, is the one who wrote most about the depressions he suffered. Incidentally, I believe that a history of depression would make for particularly interesting reading. In America, Klibansky and Panofsky have done a history of melancholy, which is entitled *Saturn and Melancholy*.²⁹ You're correct in saying that I mentioned Felix's bouts with depression; but I didn't draw any conclusions from them.

PA: They seem to occur in moments when Felix feels his Protestantism to be in conflict with his Catholic environment. Was Felix's conflict essentially religious? Or have I misread you?

ELRLD: It's rather the effect of solitude on a Protestant child in a Catholic country. This is the type of raw material that could serve toward a history of depression. The Platters book is a kind of window on a period, which is what I had tried to do with *Montaillou*. The Platters book does not have the scandalous character of *Montaillou*, which appealed to a certain voyeurism when it was published, especially in its American edition, which was mutilated by

28. Le Roy Ladurie's claim is borne out by the book. The Platters—Thomas and his sons Felix and Thomas Junior—are extraordinary examples of social mobility in the Rhineland in the sixteenth century. Starting out as a poor shepherd boy from the Valais region, Thomas the Elder (1499–1582) is an itinerant beggar, then a ropemaker, before becoming a professor of Latin, Greek, and Hebrew at Basel, where he also sets up a famous printing press. This autodidact and self-made man then provides his son Thomas with the means to travel and study in Montpellier and Paris. The diaries of both Platters are a most informative account of the encounter of Swiss Protestant humanists raised in the Basel dialect, with the Catholic culture of France in the century of the Reformation.

29. Klibansky, Raymond; Erwin Panofsky; and Fritz Saxl, *Saturn and Melancholy: Studies of Natural Philosophy, Religion and Art* (New York: Thomas Nelson and Sons, Ltd, 1964; reprint 1979).

an unscrupulous editor who took it upon himself to cut out all the “boring” parts and keep the “sexy” ones.

PA: The new tone is already reflected in the English title, *Montail-lou: The Promised Land of Error*.³⁰

ELRLD: The American edition omits about one third of the original. I couldn’t defend myself at the time. . . . You might call it a “version” of my book, but it isn’t entirely my book.

But in the case of the Platters these problems don’t occur. Nevertheless, it’s a book with a broad range of vision, since it starts around 1500; and by the time I finish the [projected] second volume, we’ll have reached the year 1628, with rather complete observations about that period. The witnesses to this period express things very deeply. It’s also an important period in the history of medicine. You probably remember that 1628 is the year of William Harvey’s discovery of the circulatory system. The Platters, of course, represent a rather backward view of medicine.

What I have attempted here is a kind of book on “Western civilization.” Western civilization books, like their corresponding courses, have their value, though they are often rightly open to question. In writing them one risks being superficial and repeating what other authors have written before. I have written a kind of Western civilization book from an isolated, irreplaceable experience.

PA: Let’s turn for a moment to the subject of event-centered (“evenementielle”) history apropos of your book on the Platters. A few reviews of *The Beggar and the Professor* spoke of a “return to great narrative history.” (This was a phrase used by Pierre Chaunu³¹ in *Le Figaro*, I believe.) For the last couple of decades,

30. Le Roy Ladurie is here reflecting on the changes inflicted by translators on an original work once that work becomes their legal property. The change of title was obviously done without the translator’s consulting the author.

31. Pierre Chaunu, a prolific historian of the *Annales* group, has written a multivolume history of Seville and the Atlantic in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries that was much inspired in its methodology by Braudel’s *Mediterranean*. His review of Ladurie’s book on the Platters appeared in the daily, *Le Figaro*, in late January 1995.

some of the French “new historians” have been talking about a “return to the event.” Pierre Nora used that phrase back in 1975.³²

ELRLD: Lawrence Stone³³ of Princeton has also spoken of a “return to the event.”

PA: About this I have a threefold question: (1) Is there a return, in the so-called “new history,” to narrativity and event? (2) Do you consider your history of the Platters to be an “événementiel” piece of writing? (3) Or does the public have a false conception of “new history,” thinking it more hostile to traditional historiography than it really is?

ELRLD: Lucien Febvre and Marc Bloch both mounted a campaign, which was perfectly justified at the time, against a purely “événementiel” history, which perhaps wasn’t as backward as they claimed but wasn’t very good history either. But it is surprising that these great men, who lived between two great wars and had even (in Marc Bloch’s case) participated in them should have proceeded to such a negation of the event and of its importance in history. Surely they both knew what it means to feel the “weight” of historical events. I believe this aspect of their approach has become somewhat dated. (Marc Bloch, after all, was assassinated by the Germans: wasn’t that an “event”?) If you mean by “anti-événementiel” history a structural approach to an era, of course there’s truth to that, too.

PA: Didn’t “anti-événementiel” also connote a hostility to a history founded on the concept of nation?

ELRLD: To a purely nationalistic history, of course. But when they spoke of a “return to the event,” both Lawrence Stone and Pierre Nora were pleased to admit that the event exists! The sociologist

32. On the “return to the event” even among French “new historians,” see Pierre Nora, “Le Retour de l’événement,” in Jacques Le Goff and Pierre Nora, eds., *Faire de l’histoire* (Paris: Gallimard, 1974) 1:285–307.

33. Lawrence Stone wrote more than forty books on English history. For the “return to the event,” see Stone’s “The Revival of Narrative: Reflections on a New Old History,” *Past and Present* 85 (1979): 3–24.

Edgar Morin,³⁴ for one, derided those historians who deny events, especially if you reflect on what the past fifty years have demonstrated about the unpredictability of events. Nobody foresaw the events of May 1968, and only a few scholars predicted the fall of communism. Events seem to have a liberty all their own!

PA: Let's return to one part of my earlier question. Do you think the Platters book represents some sort of "return to the event," or has the public been wrong in thinking that "new" historians like yourself have been hostile to event-centered history?

ELRLD: There isn't a "new history." There's just history as it has existed since Thucydides and Tacitus. Historians tend to reject a model, then return to it. We can distance ourselves from this model creatively, by doing economic history, or quantitative history, for example, but sooner or later one returns to the model. Remember what Jaurès³⁵ once said: "It's by flowing into the sea that rivers remain most faithful to their sources." While I believe that the *Annales* school has made an enormous contribution, there aren't a million different ways to write it.

III. HISTORIAN, CITIZEN, LIBRARY ADMINISTRATOR, TEACHER IN AMERICA

PA: Here are some questions of a more personal nature, directed to you as historian, citizen, library administrator, and teacher in America. You had a politically radical period in your youth: you were a member of the Communist Party from 1949 to 1956, and a member of the United Socialist Party (PSU)³⁶ for several years

34. Born in 1930, Edgar Morin, a French sociologist, has written on a variety of subjects, from the drug scene in San Francisco to the politics and government of Europe. See his *Journal de Californie* (Paris: Seuil, 1970).

35. Jean Jaurès (1859–1914), philosopher, statesman, and author (among other works) of a multivolume *Socialist History of the French Revolution* (1901–1908). A militant and eloquent Socialist, anticolonialist, and defender of Dreyfus, Jaurès was assassinated by a rabid French nationalist in 1914.

36. The PSU, or Parti Socialiste Uni, was created in the sixties, rallying disappointed former members of the Communist Party and other left-wing intellectuals who could no longer identify with the rigid dogmatism of official communism. Rather than stress doctrines such as class struggle or the dictatorship of

thereafter. During that period you broke with traditions for which you seem to have a greater respect today.

Would you say that there has been a symbiosis, or at least a parallel, between the various political positions you have assumed and the development of your career as a historian? Are there historical methods which you used previously and which you use no longer?

ELRLD: Not at all. I still do quantitative history occasionally, and I occasionally write more traditional historical narrative. It all depends on the subject, the center of interest. It's what I meant a while ago by my "à la carte" use of Braudelism.

PA: You obviously take a broad European approach to your teaching of the European past, as you did in your public lectures at the Collège de France this past winter. Do you consider yourself, politically, a "European"? Do you think France will, or should, continue to maintain a French character in a united Europe?

ELRLD: I am a "European" in my politics. I have been militantly in favor of the United States of Europe. I think Europe ought to be considered the way France was considered in the eighteenth century. France was a single nation, but it was criss-crossed by customs barriers. I think that in the face of problems like immigration, it might be a good idea to establish barriers; not an Iron Curtain, mind you, but it wouldn't be a bad idea to have a frontier, at least. To say this does not mean at all that one is anti-European. French identity is a far easier thing to defend than Breton identity, for example, since France has a language that has been taught for a long time in its schools. So there is no contradiction between being French and being European, as on a smaller scale one can be a faithful citizen of the Republic of Geneva and a citizen of Switzerland.

In any case, I don't separate the two, and I am astonished to note that the English, who have the enormous privilege of having a language spoken worldwide, an extraordinary guaranty of cultural supranationality, make no concessions on this matter. Their fantas-

the proletariat, the PSU emphasized a Marxism with a human face, including *autogestion*, or self-management of industrial firms by the workers themselves.

tic privilege in the field of supranationality ought to incite them, at times, to make some concessions to the supranationality of others.

PA: In your lectures on “Europe around 1600” this past winter you insisted a great deal on the importance of Europe’s religious history. Do you think that the fact that European Russia is traditionally Orthodox and that the rest of Europe west of the Russian border is historically Protestant or Catholic, precludes the creation of a united Europe, as De Gaulle once put it, “from the Atlantic to the Urals”?

ELRLD: I suppose we should say “from the Atlantic to Vladivostok,” because Europe “from the Atlantic to the Urals” was a conception that existed only in General De Gaulle’s imagination.³⁷ Russia, after all, extends all the way to the Pacific.

But as to the real point of your question, I do think religion very important to the European question. Not that we should, like Max Weber,³⁸ privilege Protestantism [for its role in the development of capitalism]. Belgium, for example, which was an entirely Catholic country, was the second most industrialized country in Europe in 1823, first of all because it had a well educated population, with religious motivations that were not Protestant, but Catholic, Jesuit, Jansenist, and sometimes agnostic. And we shouldn’t forget the importance of the Belgian coal mines! I think the economic history of Europe is linked with Christianity—whether Protestant or Catholic—in Belgium, Germany, northern France, England, and the United States. Protestantism was, of course, a very stimulating factor, but it was not irreplaceable.

37. In a speech delivered in Strasbourg in November 1964, Charles de Gaulle, founder and first president of the French Fifth Republic, commenting on his policy of rapprochement with the Soviet Union, had opened the prospect of a peacefully united Europe “from the Atlantic to the Urals.” The phrase became almost as famous as Churchill’s “Iron Curtain.” See André Passeron, *De Gaulle Parle, 1962–1966* (Paris: Fayard, 1966), 180.

38. Max Weber (1864–1920), the German sociologist and economist, made the celebrated association between the rise of European capitalism and the Protestant work ethic in a classic work, *Die protestantische Ethik und der Geist des Kapitalismus* (*The Protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism*, trans. Talcott Parsons [New York: Scribner, 1958]).

All the same, Max Weber did have a very good intuition when he said that religion can be a prime factor in industrialization and modernization. And we note today the impact that religious movements long dormant like Buddhism and Confucianism are having, in favoring the economic awakening of countries like Taiwan, Thailand, Singapore, South Korea, China, and Vietnam.

In Europe, the Protestant-Catholic problem has for a long time been resolved, except in Northern Ireland, but that really seems to be a residual problem, and I think some solution will be found. Today's united Europe was in great part fashioned by Catholic statesmen—men like Monnet, De Gasperi, Schuman.³⁹ It should be pointed out that it was the defeated powers of the last war who made the Europe of today. It was a humiliated European continent that attempted to recover its identity and its vigor, which explains perhaps why the English don't feel entirely at ease in the European community. I don't think that there is any problem at present between Catholics and Protestants in Europe, and an interesting fact is that one of the most vigorous countries in Europe, Germany, is a country where Catholics have become, in certain areas, a dominating social force. Bismarck's⁴⁰ Germany was dominated by Protestantism, but in the Germany of Adenauer and Kohl,⁴¹ Catholicism has weighed more heavily.

As for Orthodox Christianity, it does indeed seem to pose a problem: it is countries like Russia, the Ukraine, Romania, Bul-

39. Jean Monnet (1888–1979), Alcide De Gasperi (1881–1954), and Robert Schuman (1886–1963) are usually credited with the initiation of the idea of a “united Europe” in the years immediately following World War II.

40. Otto E. Bismarck (1815–1898), a Lutheran and a member of the Prussian Junker class, was prime minister (1867–71) of the Kingdom of Prussia under Wilhelm I, before becoming chancellor of the Second Reich (1871–1890). Bismarck played a central role in the unification of the German Second Reich.

41. Konrad Adenauer (1876–1967) was the founder of the German Christian-Democratic Union (CDU) and the first chancellor of the Federal Republic of Germany (1949–63). Born in 1930, Helmut Kohl, head of the German CDU and chancellor of the present Republic of Germany, succeeded Helmut Schmidt as chancellor of the Federal Republic in 1982. He was reelected in 1986, 1990, and 1994. He played a key role in the reunification of the two Germanies in 1989.

garia, and the former Yugoslavia who have had the most difficult time achieving a transition in the postcommunist period. In Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic, the picture appears healthier. Greece has its problems, too. It's certainly the most nationalistic member of the European Community and manages, somehow, to be on bad terms with all its neighbors, though it is not always at fault.

Without talking about Orthodox Christianity as if it were an unavoidable "destiny," there does seem to be a particularly "Orthodox" political behavior. This, however, should not prevent Europe from extending and developing eastward, first toward the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Poland, then, in a kind of second step, toward the countries we have qualified as "Orthodox." But I cannot help noticing that in the latter countries it is the old communist *nomenklatura* that continues to rule, in a democratic disguise.

PA: Many of the old communist leaders do seem to be still around. Don't you think that the old Orthodox wariness toward Rome and the Latin church might also be a factor in Eastern Europe's defensiveness toward the West?

ELRLD: But Romania, which is Orthodox, is one of the most Francophone countries in the world! No, there are other considerations. Orthodox Christianity never had a Renaissance. Perhaps Catholic countries never had a Protestant Reformation, but they did have a Renaissance and an Enlightenment. Russia did have a period of Enlightenment, but it then seems to have lost some of the Western and European elements it had acquired. None of this is predetermined, however.

PA: To pursue the subject of the survival of religious ideas in present-day Europe: I read in a recent encyclical by Pope John Paul II the view that in any conflict between "civil law" and "moral law" a Catholic is compelled to choose moral law.⁴² In your opinion, is this distinction a prolongation of the old medieval distinction be-

42. In his encyclical *Evangelium Vitae*, published in March 1995, Pope John Paul II (Karol Wojtyła, b. 1920) urges Catholics to disobey civil law, if need be, in the name of moral law, on questions such as the allowing of abortion.

tween temporal and spiritual power? Or might we say that this distinction rather prolongs the dispute on matters of conscience between Protestants and Catholics in the sixteenth century? In other words, isn't the "lay" character of the European democracies an outcome of the Protestant Reformation?

ELRLD: The Reformation was a first step, of course. But Protestantism is a factor in Protestant countries above all. The "lay" character of countries like France and Italy does not derive from Protestantism but from the Enlightenment, which is an ideology that has little to do with Christianity. (Voltaire,⁴³ remember, was an anti-Christian Deist.) Let's not privilege, as is often done, the importance of Protestantism, which in the case of France, was marginalized as a historical force after the revocation of the Edict of Nantes.⁴⁴

As far as the Pope's declarations go, I think he says what he is supposed to say. That doesn't mean one is obliged to follow him on every point. Allow me to read this text from La Bruyère. In a section entitled "On the Pulpit," La Bruyère says about preaching:

A soft, relaxed morality falls with the one who preaches it. It has nothing to awaken and pique the curiosity of the man of the world, who fears a severe doctrine less than one thinks, and who loves it even in the person who does his duty by proclaiming it. It seems, then, as if there exist in the Church two states, as it were, that must constitute it: that of speaking the truth to the fullest extent, without deference, without disguise; and that of listening to it avidly, with

43. Voltaire (François-Marie Arouet, 1694–1778) was known for his scathing wit in the face of religious orthodoxy, his defense of human rights and religious pluralism, and his conception of God as "supreme clockmaker."

44. The Edict of Nantes, a decree granting freedom of worship to Protestants in several major French cities, was promulgated by King Henri IV, a Navarre Protestant who converted to Catholicism in 1598, thus bringing to an end three decades of religious wars in France. The revocation of the edict in 1685 by King Louis XIV, under the influence of his bigoted former mistress, Madame de Maintenon, inaugurated a period of renewed persecution and repression of Protestants, which lasted until the French Revolution of 1789.

taste, with admiration, with praise, and to act, nevertheless, neither worse nor better than before.⁴⁵

I think La Bruyère says it all here. I think there are people whose business is to say what must be done, and then there is real life. The Pope attempts to fix rules which he knows very well are not entirely applied. We shouldn't expect the Pope to speak the language of *True Confessions*, or to use the language of the most recent pornographic film or of "Fun Radio."⁴⁶ The Pope's language is not that of the modern world—which does not mean that we're obliged to follow the Pope every time he says something.

PA: So you don't think that the opposition between "civil law" and "moral law" prolongs a conflict born of the Reformation?

ELRLD: Let me repeat: I think Protestantism began this movement, but the conflict did not take the same direction in every country in modern times. In Catholic and Latin countries the break between "moral" and "civil" law has a different history from that in Protestant countries. Unquestionably, the United States, for example, is a more religious country than France because of the different way this conflict evolved.

PA: Now I have some questions concerning your career as a French civil official. For more than seven years (1986–94) you served as administrator general of the Bibliothèque Nationale. It was a period of great modernization of the research tools of the BN as well as a period of "social peace," as the French expression goes.

45. Le Roy Ladurie read (in French) from the following edition: La Bruyère, "De la Chaire," vol. 12, no. 1, in *Les Caractères*, ed. Robert Garapon (Paris: Garnier, 1962), 449–50: "La morale douce et relâchée tombe avec celui qui la prêche; elle n'a rien qui réveille et qui pique la curiosité d'un homme du monde, qui craint moins qu'on ne pense une doctrine sévère, et qui l'aime même dans celui qui fait son devoir en l'annonçant. Il semble donc qu'il y ait dans l'Eglise comme deux états qui doivent la partager: celui de dire la vérité dans toute son étendue, sans égards, sans déguisement; celui de l'écouter avidement, avec goût, avec admiration, avec éloges, et de n'en faire cependant ni pis ni mieux."

46. A call-in radio show aired daily, and directed largely toward French teenagers who enjoy open discussions about sex and related questions and problems.

There wasn't a single personnel strike at the BN during this whole period, and that is by no means the least of your accomplishments. What lessons did you derive from those years as a high state official?

ELRLD: A lesson of "proximity," first of all. As administrator general I tried to stay close to the personnel. This may be less of a problem in great libraries in the United States, where library employees are better paid. But in an institution as fragile as the Bibliothèque Nationale it was necessary to have an administrator who "showed up" and was available to people. And if we succeeded in having "social peace," it may have been due to what my collaborators and I succeeded in doing.

PA: So you didn't limit your role to that of High Civil Official?

ELRLD: No, I remembered the village community I had been brought up in, and I treated the Bibliothèque Nationale community like a village. I may have been a bit paternalistic in my methods. In any case the main entrance of the BN is an excellent place to meet people. That large vestibule was a stroke of genius on the part of the architect who designed the building.

This being said, I wasn't much impressed by the political class I had to deal with, especially the socialists under whom I served, or by those who succeeded them. These politicians are very difficult to reach. They live in a closed circle, and they have truly little consideration for intellectuals, whom they pretend to respect only if they need them.

PA: Is this a characteristic of the political class on the right as well as on the left? I mean giving intellectuals consideration only if you need them?

ELRLD: Absolutely. They have an "instrumental" view of the intellectual. I don't know what it's like in the United States, but the political class here in France is cut off from the people, haughty, arrogant. Allow me to quote this text from *Beowulf*. This is from Hrothgar's speech to Beowulf apropos of the fall of heroes through the sin of arrogance:

It is always a wonder
 in His full understanding
 their wisdom of mind,
 He rules everything.
 a high-born heart
 gives a man holdings,
 stronghold of nobles,
 great tracts of land,
 that lacking true wisdom
 his rule at an end.
 from feast to feast.
 from illness, age,
 darkens his mind,
 sharpen its blade,
 turns to his pleasure.
 until, within him,
 begins to increase,
 the soul's shepherd.
 bound up in cares;
 who shoots his bow
 Then he is hit in the heart,
 with the bitter arrow,
 of the wicked demon,
 Too brief it seems,
 Angry and covetous,
 to honor his men.⁴⁷

how God the Almighty
 deals out to men
 their lands, nobility.
 Sometimes He lets
 travel far in delight,
 joy of his birthright,
 puts in his control
 such wide kingdoms
 he cannot imagine
 Happily he lives
 No thought of harm
 or malicious tongues
 nor does conflict anywhere
 but the whole world
 He knows no worse
 his portion of arrogance
 when his guardian sleeps,
 Too sound is that sleep,
 the killer very near
 with treacherous aim.
 struck under helmet
 the dark commands
 and he knows no defense.
 that long time he ruled.
 he gives no rings

PA: So French politicians “give no rings to honor their men”?

ELRLD: They have no sense of reciprocity. They “give no rings to honor their men.” By the way, the Old English for “portion of arrogance” is “ofer-hygda.” I had many an occasion to see “ofer-hygda” at work in men like Mitterand and Balladur.⁴⁸

47. As was the case for his quotation from La Bruyère (n. 46), Le Roy Ladurie interrupted the interview to fetch a book from his personal library and read from it. The quotation is taken from *Beowulf: A Dual Language Edition*, translated and with an introduction and commentary by Howell D. Chickering Jr. (Dover: Anchor Books, 1977), 149–50, ll. 1725–50.

48. Born in 1916, François Mitterand was president of the French Republic

PA: Is it a form of hubris?

ELRLD: You might call it that. I must say that that was a relatively interesting lesson I learned from those years. My political ideas had been shaped long before, but the lesson was clear. Whether these people are in power or in the opposition they're always equally impossible, or at least very difficult, to reach. In spite of this I remain genuinely committed to democracy. It would be interesting to see how things function in Washington. Of course, America isn't as centralized as France.

PA: Since you've mentioned America several times, let me ask you a couple of final questions about your experiences in American universities. You have taught extensively in America, you have been a guest of the Western Studies Program at Cornell, and I'm sure you are aware of the "culture wars," one aspect of which is an attack by the left on what is considered the excessively Eurocentric character of traditional courses in the humanities.

Do you think, to begin with, that the very notion of a historical survey or program entitled "Western Civilization," or "Western Studies" is a dated, reactionary concept? Can it have any pedagogical value for the undergraduate?

ELRLD: I think it is a remarkable notion. In France, for example, students have been too enclosed within French culture. It has perhaps been the same in England, Germany, or Italy, I'm not sure. Some educators have wanted national boundaries to "explode," to obtain a transnational view of education that would include America, or Europe taken as an entirety. I find that a remarkable thing, I mean to make national boundaries "explode." So I don't find the idea of "Western Studies" reactionary. On the contrary.

from 10 May 1981 to 17 May 1995 (he died 8 January 1996). Mitterand appointed Le Roy Ladurie administrator general of the Bibliothèque Nationale in 1986. Edouard Balladur (b. 1931), who entered politics as a protégé of former President Georges Pompidou (d. 1974), has been regularly elected to parliament on the conservative ticket. He served as Mitterand's prime minister after the conservative parliamentary victory of 1993 and was defeated in his bid for the presidency in the May 1995 presidential election.

The idea of a “Western” approach such as you find it in America is far better than the nationalistic approach which, unfortunately, has too often characterized European education. The idea of “Western” civilization is based not on a reactionary ideology but on a very stimulating, if sometimes naive ideology of progress.

If you favor a “non-Western” approach to education to favor the learning of other great civilizations—Chinese, or Islamic, for example—that is an arguable notion, although you can’t learn everything at once. But if it’s to argue that the memoirs of a Guatemalan peasant, or of an obscure American feminist from Minnesota in 1880 is a cultural “fact” as important as any other, I find that grotesque. In French culture it’s the same thing. To give equal footing to the most prodigious works of French culture and to some obscure production from the French-speaking Pacific islands is something I can’t agree with.

PA: Can one consider oneself a “cultural pluralist” and still hold to the idea of “Western civilization”?

ELRLD: What I liked about the “Western civilization” idea was that it was nonprovincial. American universities are the least provincial in the world, intellectually speaking. They have been characterized by a prodigious openness, by the greatly varied specializations of their scholars, by their “secular” character and their openness to many currents of thought: Marxist, feminist, gay-lesbian, etc. I believe this nonprovincial character of the American university should be maintained, and that we should remind ourselves that the idea of Western civilization was a sign of that openness.

PARIS, 3 MAY 1995